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Obituaries

## Coined, Mocked 'Meritocracy'

By MARGALIT FOX

Michael Young, a sociologist and reformer who was a chief architect of Britain's postwar welfare state, died Jan. 14 at his home in London. He was 86.

He had been ill with cancer for some time, The Associated Press reported.

Although he never held elective office, Mr. Young (more properly Lord Young of Dartington; he was awarded a life peerage in 1978) was a master of backstage policy making, writing the manifesto that helped the Labor Party win a landslide victory in 1945 and instituting reforms in education, housing, health care and consumers' rights.

"Few people have made such a contribution to our society in so many different areas," Prime Minister Tony Blair said in tribute. "He was that rare combination — not just a great thinker but a great doer."

The co-author of a classic work of sociology, "Family and Kinship in East London" (1957), Mr. Young was also known for coining the word "meritocracy," first used in his biting futuristic satire, "The Rise of the Meritocracy" (1958).

Unlike most academic sociologists, Mr. Young could translate ideology into brick and mortar. Celebrated by colleagues for charm, energy and a sense of mission that harked back to Victorian reformers like Henry Mayhew, Mr. Young founded more than a dozen social- service organizations, including the Consumers' Association, whose magazine "Which?" rated products; the Advisory Center for Education (whose magazine "Where?" rated schools); and a televised "university of the air," which was the model for Britain's Open University, renowned for making secondary education broadly accessible.

Michael Dunlop Young was born Aug. 9, 1915, in Manchester, England, and spent his early boyhood in Australia. His parents were artists — his father a violinist and music critic, his mother an actress and painter — and money was scarce. As his parents' marriage dissolved, they briefly considered giving him up for adoption; the enduring memory of fear and powerlessness from that time, he later said, inspired his lifelong campaign to help the disenfranchised.

Returning to England, he attended a series of authoritarian schools before landing, at 14, at the Dartington Hall School in Devon, a progressive institution offering a utopian, yet pragmatic, education, where it was hoped that young Michael would emerge as a highly trained fruit farmer.

He went, instead, to the London School of Economics and was called to the bar in 1939, though he never practiced law. In 1945, he became director of research for the Labor

Party, where he drafted its platform, titled "Let Us Face the Future." In it, Mr. Young set forth the party's mission: to build a "free, democratic, efficient, public-spirited country with its material resources organized in the service of the British people." Mr. Young's work was credited with helping assure the victory of the Labor government of Prime Minister Clement Attlee over the Conservatives and their leader, Winston Churchill.

In 1951, Mr. Young left his party post to pursue a doctorate in sociology from London University, and later helped found the Institute of Community Studies, a research institution concerned with housing, poverty and family life. "Family and Kinship in East London" grew out of the institute's fieldwork: Mr. Young and his co-author, Peter Willmott, surveyed residents of a tight-knit working-class London community who had been resettled in a suburban "housing estate." Their work described the social costs that resulted.

But it was "The Rise of the Meritocracy" that made Mr. Young world famous. Written as a doctoral dissertation looking back from the year 2034, the book described the emergence of a new elite determined not by social position but by achievement on the standardized intelligence tests that were a very real, and dreaded, fact of educational life in 20th-century Britain. To name this new elite, Mr. Young forced the marriage of a Latin root to a Greek suffix, yielding "meritocracy."

He meant the term as a pejorative, for underneath the mock academic tract lay bitter social commentary. Though the test-based system of advancement emerging in postwar Britain appeared to provide opportunity for all, it was, Mr. Young argued, simply the centuries-old class system in sheep's clothing.

Lacking access to the best schools, underprivileged children routinely did badly on the 11-plus exam, the test given to children after sixth grade that largely determined their professional future. As a result, the disadvantaged remained at the bottom of the social ladder, their poor scores used to justify the status quo. "The Rise of the Meritocracy" became an international best seller and was credited with leading to the abolition of the 11-plus in Britain.

Mr. Young's first marriage ended in divorce. His second, to Sasha Moorsom, lasted from 1960 until her death in 1993. In 1995, he married Dorit Uhlemann; she survives him, along with the couple's daughter, Gaia, born when Mr. Young was 80, and five children from his earlier marriages.

Writing in *The Guardian* last week, Mr. Young's son Toby observed that his father's social conscience endured to the end. During a hospital stay last month, his son wrote, the elder Mr. Young was busy firing off letters to officials about the working conditions of the immigrant women who brought him his meal trays. "Do they even get the minimum wage?" one letter said. "Is any effort made to teach them English? I doubt it."

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